THE IMAGE OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA, 2023

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
	The use of information technologies in the war in Ukraine is of particular relevance due to the growing importance of fake news in the digital ecosystem. Using a quantitative and qualitative methodology, metrics were obtained to identify common patterns and differences in the coverage of the conflict by a selection of media outlets, as well as the most significant fake news. Despite the challenges in assessing the social impact and scope of this problem on digital platforms, monitoring it enables the identification of new opportunities and risks in the information society.

1. Introduction

I n the past year, the conflict in Ukraine (which commenced with Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022) has been referred to as the first to develop not only on the battlefield, but also in social networks since the initial clashes in the Euromaidan (Donofrio et al., 2023).

This paper seeks to explore the context of Ukraine in recent years and the factors that led to the outbreak of hostilities. The year 1991 marked the independence of Ukraine following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Conant, 2022). However, even at this late stage, the country was already divided in two, and this fragmentation was the historical origin of the conflict that has taken place in the area in recent years. One part of the population has been pro-Ukrainian and pro-European, while the other part, located mainly in the southeast of the country, is pro-Russian and has defended its own institutions and armed forces with the support of the Kremlin.

During Yanukovich's government, in 2013, there was a first attempt to annex Ukraine to the European Union, an attempt that finally failed due to Vladimir Putin's economic promises to the neighbouring country (Sahuquillo, 2022), provoking the uprising of the population most sympathetic to the West and unleashing the so-called Euromaidan. In the aftermath of this crisis, Yanukovich's government resigned, leading to a transition of power to the nationalists, which resulted in escalating tensions between the two factions of the population.

In the context of this tension, at the beginning of 2014, Crimea, a region in the south of Ukraine with a predominantly pro-Russian population, was annexed to Russia (RTVE, 2015) following a referendum which was marred by a lack of democratic guarantees, and which was not recognised by Western countries. This move by Russia resulted in the imposition of restrictive measures by the European Union. In the aftermath of this annexation, pro-Russian forces proceeded to occupy several regions in eastern Ukraine, precipitating new armed conflicts in the Donbas (RTVE, 2015).

Tension in this area has persisted since then, and it was precisely the end of the war that was the argument used by Volodymir Zelenski to win the 2019 elections, along with the promise of a new rapprochement with the European Union and the fight against corruption.

In 2021, the year in which Zelensky intends to accelerate Ukraine's accession to NATO, tension intensifies with Moscow, which rejects the initiative and demands a commitment not to expand NATO, as a way to avoid extending the influence of Western countries to Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Consequently, the Russian president initiated the deployment of military forces in proximity to the Ukrainian border, as a prelude to the commencement of the invasion.

On 24 February 2022, Putin formally declared the commencement of the invasion of Ukraine, characterising it as a "special military operation" (Troianovski, 2022). This event marked the onset of a protracted conflict that continues to the present day, with profound geopolitical and economic implications, particularly for Europe and the United States.

2. Theoretical framework

According to data from the 2020 InfoAdex Study of Advertising Investment in Spain, 2019 was the first year in which digital media surpassed television in terms of advertising investment (InfoAdex, 2020). This shift in advertising investment can be attributed to the increased use of the internet by the audience. The time spent daily on the internet has increased from 5.5 hours in 2000 to 219.5 hours in 2022 (AIMC, 2023). In Spain, 85% of In Spain, 85% of internet users aged 12 to 74 use social networks, representing nearly 30 million individuals (IAB, 2023). Regarding newspaper reading habits, 55.1% of respondents to AIMC's Navegantes en la Red 2022 study claim to read only the electronic version.

It is an irrefutable fact that the internet has caused a radical change in the manner in which we communicate, access and generate information, as well as the media market. The traditional media is no longer the sole mediator between citizens and daily events, determining which events are to be considered newsworthy. Instead, the network has enabled the proliferation of numerous discourses and voices, with events that initially circulate on social networks often becoming news.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the main protagonists and victims of the conflict, civilians and soldiers, have utilised social networks to disseminate a variety of content. For instance, from the onset of the invasion, numerous videos of Ukrainian soldiers engaged in leisurely activities, such as dancing,

have been observed on TikTok (Segura, 2023). Concurrently, the most distressing images of the war have been broadcast on the platform. Furthermore, many individuals utilise social networks to disclose their whereabouts to family members and friends (Antena 3, 2022). A notable example is that of soldier Alex Hook, who became a viral sensation on the social network.

A search for hashtags such as "#UkrainianSoldier" reveals that the content has been viewed more than seven million times on TikTok. Similarly, the hashtag "#UkrainianWar" has garnered more than 553 million views. These figures underscore the role of TikTok as a platform for "expression by individuals directly affected by the conflict, who typically lack a platform to articulate their experiences" (RTVE, 2023).

Furthermore, social media has functioned as a potent propaganda channel. Since the onset of the invasion, Zelenski has been broadcasting via his official Telegram, Facebook, Instagram and X accounts. The content of these videos has included information regarding the state of the war, as well as communication with soldiers and the Ukrainian populace, with a view to the dissemination of messages of hope and encouragement (Olivares, et al., 2022). Furthermore, the Ukrainian president's consistent use of social media has been a strategic move to demonstrate his presence in the country, particularly when attired in military attire. This approach has not only garnered military support but also raised global awareness.

Telegram has emerged as a pivotal digital platform during the conflict, particularly in Russia, where it serves as a means of circumventing the stringent censorship imposed on the media. It is estimated that at the beginning of the war, more than two million people downloaded Telegram in Russia (RTVE, 2022).

For a number of Russian journalists, social networks have functioned as both a means of expression and a conduit for censorship and judgement by the Kremlin. A case in point is that of Russian journalist Marina Ovsyannikova of Channel One (Corral, 2022), who was compelled to question the attack on Ukraine with a banner in the middle of a news broadcast, and who had, days earlier, condemned Moscow's aggression on her social networks. The case of this journalist, who was sentenced to eight years in prison (Cuesta, 2023), has gained significant attention and has resonated on social networks in Western countries. Conversely, Tatiana Ulianova, residing in Spain, was terminated from her position "due to her social media posts expressing opposition to the war in Ukraine" (Carrión, 2022).

These examples are indicative of a novel communicative and propagandistic form of international conflict, which finds expression in the contemporary information society.

During the First World War, the use of posters played a pivotal role in the recruitment of soldiers and the aggrandisement and intimidation of the opposing powers (Requeijo et al., 2013). It is important to note that this propaganda was "mostly based on false and/or distorted information" (Schulze, 2013, p. 28). Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the concept of "black propaganda" is a disinformation technique that aims to manipulate and deceive the public, presenting itself as journalistic information (Newcourt, 2006).

The Second World War is notable for being the first war to be covered extensively by the mass media, with the mass media playing 'an important role in the conduct of a war' for the first time (Schulze, 2013, p. 15). During World War II, radio emerged as the predominant medium for the dissemination of information and propaganda, with the "great battle of the airwaves" unfolding (Bordería et al., 1996, p. 368). However, with the advent of the internet, conflicts and political decisions have undergone significant transformation. As Lopez (2023) observes, "the battles of the 21st century began to be fought in the digital domain, as the Internet and social networks disrupted the conventional channels of information" (p. 56).

A significant body of research has emerged from scholars examining the strategic and formal changes in propaganda, as well as the discourses disseminated by the network in the political, electoral, ideological, or armed conflict sphere. Staal (2019) has developed the role of propaganda in the post-truth era of the 21st century; Harmon and Bowdish (2018) have focused on the loss of control of the mass media as propaganda channels towards public opinion, and have addressed the threat of the discourses born from terrorist organisations that flood the internet without the filter of the media; and Soules (2015) has provided a description of the most important persuasive techniques in mass society through multiple case studies.

Leticia Rodríguez-Fernández emphasises the dual role of social networks as both "informative and propagandistic agents", using the utilisation of these platforms by the Islamic State since 2017 as a

paradigmatic case study (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2018). Additionally, Huici (2020) discusses in his book "Theory and History of Propaganda" the challenges confronting the West by "the Islamic resurgence", emphasising its close connection with social networks.

All these developments in today's information society are closely related to social and cultural globalisation, as well as to the rapid spread of knowledge. The contemporary age is one where information is accessible at unprecedented speeds and in unprecedented quantities; never before has the world been so informed. This phenomenon, which has been termed "infoxication" (Casas, 2014) by some authors, has led to a state of information saturation, as well as the proliferation of disinformation and fake news. This development has the potential to disrupt the connection that has been established between the information society and the knowledge society, thereby bringing us closer to the concept of the disinformation society.

The concept of 'fake news' is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a progression of sensationalism and yellow journalism that emerged in the early stages of mass journalism. This phenomenon can be traced back to ancient Rome, where "legends, hoaxes, defamation and malicious propaganda transcended the centuries to glorify some and tarnish others" (Fundación Telefónica, 2023).

The phenomenon of disinformation has been shown to be of particular sensitivity in the context of war and international conflict. Indeed, it has been posited that a war is waged in parallel to that which takes place on the battlefield, to the point that "we could say that the disinformation phenomenon has been established as a mechanism of war since the beginning of the 20th century" (Gómez, et al., 2022, p.230). The objectives pursued by disinformation are manifold and are typically associated with political interests and the erosion of credibility, not only of the enemy, but also of the media itself in its role of informing. The consequences of such actions can be seen in the form of more vulnerable societies, where the "truth" is distorted, and the genuine consequences of warfare are underestimated.

The internet and digital platforms have been observed to facilitate the rapid dissemination of misinformation and hoaxes, often at a faster rate than traditional media. This phenomenon has led to the formation of a vicious cycle wherein content, upon reaching a substantial audience, is subsequently disseminated by that same audience, thus perpetuating the cycle. The advent of new technological realities, underpinned by the systematic utilisation of algorithms and, more recently, artificial intelligence, has served to amplify the reach of misinformation on digital platforms. The generation of deepfakes, as they are known, involves the creation of AI-generated files that replicate faces and voices. Disinformation propagated through this medium is increasingly difficult for users to identify, while concurrently, access to the tools necessary for its creation is expanding, to the extent that the "realistic manipulation of images and videos now requires only a few mouse clicks. The existence of commercial software and databases renders this work accessible to virtually any individual" (Flores et al. 2023, p. 9). This scenario demands novel solutions and forms of content validation that guarantee democratic quality without compromising freedom of expression.

Since the Euromaidan and the subsequent annexation of Crimea, Russia has consistently engaged in the dissemination of disinformation towards Ukraine (García y Salvat, 2023). This practice has been further intensified following the invasion. Consequently, prominent digital platforms and social networks, including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, have taken measures to restrict the dissemination of RT and Sputnik content, aiming to hinder Moscow's propagation of propaganda with disinformation undertones (Del Castillo, 2022). Concurrently, in Ukraine, "the disconnection of Russian roaming services by Ukrainian operators has been identified as a significant impediment to the dissemination of the Russian narrative within the country" (Gómez et al., 2023, p.69).

Fake news is not always created and disseminated by the authorities as a propaganda strategy, but we often see content on social networks that is intended for personal gain, such as the case of a man "posing as a Russian soldier to sell products on TikTok" (20 Minutos, 2023).

3. Objectives

The primary objective (PO) is to study the use of information technologies in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, through a use case focused on the third quarter of 2023, corresponding to the months of July, August and September. The following aspects are addressed as specific objectives:

SO 1) Media coverage of the conflict in our country. The selection of media outlets and the type of data obtained are specified in the methodology. Concurrently, attention will be directed towards Spanish correspondents who have visited Ukrainian territory and disseminated content on their social profiles.

SO 2) The identification of the primary hoaxes and disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine disseminated in Spain.

4. Methodology

The present study has selected the digital newspapers with the largest audience in Spain, taking as a reference the General Media Framework of the Association for Media Research. The study, which was published in 2023 and utilised data from 2022, revealed that the five most widely read paid-for general news newspapers in our country, considering both print and digital editions, were: El País, El Mundo, La Vanguardia, ABC and La Voz de Galicia (AIMC, 2023). It is important to note that these media outlets are part of communication groups with economic and political interests, and that the content published on their digital platforms is determined by their editors.

The selection of newspapers over other media such as radio or television is due to the greater ease of access to their content, not only online, but also in their paper editions through tools such as Kiosko y Más[1], and the ease of searching their web portals for terms related to the conflict.

In addition to analysing the news published on their web portals on the topic mentioned, the official social profiles of the five media selected for this study are taken into account, with particular attention paid to Instagram and YouTube. The rationale behind this choice is twofold: firstly, these are social networks where the five media in question have a presence; and secondly, on Facebook and Twitter it is not possible to access the history of publications without the use of paid tools. The following metrics will be collected in these social networks: total posts, posts about the conflict, followers, and interactions (video views, times the content is shared, etc.). It should be noted that all of these metrics are subject to variation over time, with a likelihood of increase, and that some posts may be removed.

The size of the selected sample would be as follows:

- El País: 697 news items, 607 Instagram posts and 857 YouTube videos were reviewed.
- El Mundo: 841 news items, 649 Instagram posts and 670 YouTube videos were reviewed.
- La Vanguardia: 559 news items, 582 Instagram posts and 925 YouTube videos were reviewed.
- ABC: 931 news stories, 603 Instagram posts and 336 YouTube videos were reviewed.
- La Voz de Galicia: 271 news items, 369 Instagram posts and 9 YouTube videos were reviewed.

In relation to war reporters or correspondents, data has been collected on the degree of interaction of the social profiles of 58 journalists with more than a thousand followers on the social network X. These journalists were awarded in 2022 by the Spanish Media Association for their work in covering the conflict. Other freelance journalists have also been included in the study, despite not having been awarded, as they have also played an important role in the coverage of the conflict. The data was compiled using the free tool HypeAuditor[2], and it was found that Instagram is the platform that provides the most accurate data. Therefore, Instagram was included in the study.

It is important to note that not all areas of study could be centralised in the third quarter of the year, and that while in some cases the information was compiled manually, in others the aforementioned tools were used to facilitate the analysis (Kiosko y Más[1] and HypeAuditor[2]).

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[1] Access to the Kiosk and More tool: https://www.kioskoymas.com

[2] Accessing the HypeAuditor tool: https://hypeauditor.com/es/

Several methodological difficulties inherent in the development of the use case should be mentioned.

1) An excess of information and actors in the network with the capacity to disseminate content on the conflict. The selection of three months was made for the purpose of generalisation, with the understanding that other time periods could be extrapolated, if necessary, given the media's tendency to refrain from making strategic changes in the short to medium term.
2) All data presented in the results have been collected during the month of December 2023. It is acknowledged that some of the data, such as social media interactions, may be subject to minor fluctuations over time.
3) The absence of free and reliable tools that provide data on the impact of third-party digital information, or social media metrics beyond the data visible in the publications themselves, is also a limitation of the study.
4) The tool employed to ascertain the degree of interaction of war reporters' social profiles (HypeAuditor) does not fully disclose its methodology for calculating this metric.
5) The inability to retrieve the posting history of social profiles over which there is no control in the case of X or Facebook.

5. Results

5.1. Official Media

5.1.1. News on the Conflict in Selected Media

A search was conducted on the online versions of El País, El Mundo, La Vanguardia, ABC and La Voz de Galicia in the months under study (July, August and September) in order to identify the amount of news content generated on the war between Russia and Ukraine.

To this end, the websites' internal search engines were utilised, employing keywords, and the specific sections that some media outlets have on this subject. All content types were considered, including news items, editorials, and opinion articles.

Table 1. Number of online news items published per month on the war in Ukraine by the five newspapers with the highest readership. It is completed with the penetration data and number of subscribers.

Diary	Number of news items published			Audience penetration %. EGM 2022 data	Number of *online* subscribers
	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER		
EL PAÍS	161	117	130	1,8	300.000
EL MUNDO	95	94	84	1,1	123.000
LA VANGUARDIA	51	47	58	0,9	130.000
ABC	138	128	133	0,9	Not available
LA VOZ DE GALICIA	77	70	81	0,8	Not available

Source: Own elaboration, 2024. Audience penetration corresponds to the results of the EGM 2022. The number of subscribers is that published by the newspapers themselves.

The medium with the most news published is El País, which is influenced by the number of correspondents it has had in Ukraine and Russia, around 15 reporters since the conflict began (El País,

2022). Additionally, the daily publication of a summary of the conflict's most significant events is a distinctive feature of El País, a practice that is not observed in any of the other newspapers examined in this study.

In contrast, La Vanguardia offers a more limited array of information, likely attributable to the challenges inherent in navigating its search engine and tagging system to access specific subjects.

It is noteworthy that the period of August, characterised by the holiday season, is associated with a decline in news production, which directly impacts the coverage of the conflict. Despite the absence of definitive studies examining the potential seasonality of fluctuations in digital media and social network audience, the collected data indicates a decline in news consumption during August.

In order to provide context for the subsequent data, it is necessary to consider the fact that in February 2022, the month in which the conflict began, a total of 224 news items were published in El País, the digital newspaper with the highest production of news on the subject, within a period of just five days. This figure stands in stark contrast to the average of 136 news items published per month in July, August and September. A similar trend is observed in ABC, the second newspaper with the most content, which published 207 news items in these five days in February 2022.

The sudden onset conflict in Europe, in conjunction with the prevailing tendency of the media to prioritise novel subjects, results in an increased production during the initial months. This phenomenon can be attributed to the role of the media in shaping the daily news agenda and determining what qualifies as newsworthy. However, as time progresses, the initial novelty associated with a conflict tends to dissipate, leading to a stabilisation of news content. This, in turn, creates space and importance for new events to emerge. A 2017 study on the novelty of journalistic content in the online press highlighted that "Abc.es and Elpais.com are examples of Spanish cyber media that offer a resounding news flow" (Méndez and Nogueira, 2017, p.1,468).

Concurrently, it is imperative to emphasise the public's inherent demand for information in the face of the novelty and uncertainty engendered by the invasion. Consulting Google Trends, a tool that displays search trends and their progression over time, reveals that from February 2022 to mid-March, search terms related to the conflict attained an interest level of 100, the maximum value representing the most popular terms. This heightened interest is also evident in the response of media coverage.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the existence of an unequal treatment of news topics. For instance, an analysis of El País during the third quarter of the year reveals an average of 520 news items per month related to politics and 480 related to sports.

5.1.2. Instagram Posts on the Conflict in Selected Media Outlets

In relation to the content of the conflict instigated by these media outlets on social networks, certain trends have been identified through the creation of a table displaying the number of publications and key metrics on the social networks of these newspapers.

Table 2. Key metrics of posts with content related to the war in Ukraine on the Instagram accounts of the five selected media outlets in July, August and September.

Diary	Metric	July	August	September
EL PAÍS	Total publications	215	192	200
	Publications on the conflict	1	1	1
	I like it	4.720	3.746	10.100
	Comments	259	86	560
	Video playback	267.576	252.992	-
	Followers		1.7 million	

EL MUNDO	Total publications	223	207	219
	Publications on the conflict	1	6	0
	I like it	1.631	35.084	0
	Comments	31	1.308	0
	Video playback	88.108	1.696.508	0
	Followers		1.3 million	
LA VANGUARDIA	Total publications	146	128	308
	Publications on the conflict	2	1	1
	I like it	79.828	5.601	9.644
	Comments	2.378	203	620
	Video playback	873.531	732.013	-
	Followers		857 thousand	
ABC	Total publications	199	202	202
	Publications on the conflict	0	2	1
	I like it	0	7.534	3.983
	Comments	0	537	342
	Video playback	0	334.172	-
	Followers		698 thousand	
LA VOZ DE GALICIA	Total publications	121	114	134
	Publications on the conflict	0	1	0
	I like it	0	431	0
	Comments	0	6	0
	Video playback	0	-	0
	Followers		170 thousand	

Source**:** Own elaboration, 2024.

The following observations can be made regarding the data and the visualisation of publications on Instagram, in the context of the subject under consideration:

1) A mere 1 to 2 publications on the subject were detected. The newspaper and month with the most content is El Mundo, with 6 publications in August. In terms of total number of publications, August still sees less production.
2) The content on the war in Ukraine is predominantly associated with three events: the emotional video of a child viewing a photograph of his father, a soldier killed in action; the news of a Spanish volunteer who has fallen victim to the war; and the case of the Wagner Group.
3) A content analysis of recent publications reveals that the most prevalent themes captured in images and videos are the earthquake in Morocco and the fire in Hawaii, both of which have garnered global attention; at the national level, the Rubiales case, political developments related to the elections, and the rains and floods caused by the Dana have dominated news cycles.
4) Furthermore, there are other publications, such as a video of a cat sneaking into a law class or a bull travelling as a co-pilot, which aim to go viral, as well as to attract interactions, and which are repeated on the Instagram accounts of these newspapers.
5) In their social media strategy, and especially on Instagram, some newspapers create recurring content, as in the case of El País, with the BBVA talks "Aprendamos Juntos" ("Let's Learn Together") (El País, 2022), or in the case of El Mundo with publications related to famous phrases or the week's protagonists.
6) La Voz de Galicia is the social network with the least content on the conflict, as it is more focused on the regional sphere.
7) In the case of El Mundo, especially in August, the videos featuring Alberto Rojas (@rojas1977), the newspaper's Ukrainian correspondent, are of particular note.

5.1.3. *YouTube Posts on the Conflict in Selected Media Outlets*

Table 3. Key metrics of videos with content related to the war in Ukraine on the YouTube channel of the five selected media outlets in July, August and September.

Diary	Metric	July	August	September
EL PAÍS	Total videos	293	275	289
	Videos on the conflict	32	31	34
	Visualisations	912.911	809.052	903.795
	I like it	9.376	7.981	8.950
	Comments	3.402	2.943	3.546
	Subscribers		2.5 million	
EL MUNDO	Total videos	231	215	224
	Videos on the conflict	8	8	4
	Visualisations	21.888	32.516	67.146
	I like it	230	308	495
	Comments	77	133	229
	Subscribers		1.0 million	
LA VANGUARDIA	Total videos	312	293	320
	Videos on the conflict	10	8	9

	Visualisations	310.501	198.114	272.346
	I like it	3.951	1.782	3.179
	Comments	18.052	929	1.427
	Subscribers	1.8 million		
ABC	Total videos	123	103	110
	Videos on the conflict	0	0	1
	Visualisations	0	0	45
	I like it	0	0	1
	Comments	0	0	0
	Subscribers	16,6 mil		
LA VOZ DE GALICIA	Total videos	5	1	3
	Videos on the conflict	0	0	0
	Visualisations	0	0	0
	I like it	0	0	0
	Comments	0	0	0
	Subscribers	16.8 mil		

Source**:** Own elaboration, 2024.

In relation to YouTube videos, the following aspects can be highlighted:

1) El País is the media outlet that has published the most generic videos on the war. The same newspaper that publishes it on its website also displays it in images on its YouTube channel.
2) In the case of El Mundo and La Vanguardia, it is surprising that, given their publishing of between 200 and 300 videos per month, they have hardly generated any content on the conflict. La Vanguardia has a specific section called 'The Russian invasion, explained', with 32 videos, most of which were published before June of this year.
3) A general observation reveals that the thematic content of the videos aligns closely with that of the website.

Despite the unfeasibility of conducting a more comprehensive monitoring exercise, an analysis of recent weeks' media publications on the social network X reveals a preponderance of political content. A similar trend is observed on Facebook and Instagram.

Content related to the conflict in the media's social networks is scarce. However, a cursory review of the front pages of major print newspapers reveals a notable presence of news related to the Ukraine war, with El País dedicating 30 days of coverage in recent months and El Mundo dedicating 32 days.

The media employ distinct content strategies, contingent on the dissemination channel, a phenomenon that has been further exacerbated by the pre-eminence of television. As Ramonet (1995, p. 10) notes, "little by little it is becoming established among people that the importance of events is proportional to their wealth of images." The advent of the Internet has further intensified this phenomenon, as content must be both expeditious and easily consumable. Information technologies are closely related to the imaging of events.

5.1.4. Publications on the Conflict of Reporters and Correspondents

Reporters and correspondents from the mainstream media, as well as freelancers who go into conflict zones, are one of the most important sources of news. In recent years, there has been a powerful development in the technologies applied to journalistic production, with the immediate dissemination of images and video of events that can be transmitted in real time.

It is to be expected that these journalists on the front line of the war in Ukraine used their own social networks to disseminate the information that was being published simultaneously in the media for which they work. In December last year, the Asociación de Medios de Información de España, in the framework of its annual Claves 2023 conference, awarded "the 58 correspondents who are reporting or have reported on the ground about the Russian invasion of Ukraine" (AMI, 2022).

The following table lists the award-winning journalists with more than a thousand followers on the social network X, to which we have added other freelance journalists who may not have received awards, but who have also played an important role in covering the conflict.

Table 4. Information regarding the Instagram and X accounts of journalists who have covered the conflict. Table ordered by number of followers on X.

Journalist	Environment in which they work	INTAGRAM		X	
		Followers	Degree of interaction	Followers	Degree of interaction
Mikel Ayiestarán	*ABC*	26.5 thousand	0,9	189,1	0,3
Almudena Ariza	*TVE*	24.5 thousand	3,3	182,1	3,7
Gervasio Sánchez	Freelance	24.1 mil	2,0	121,9	0,4
María R. Sahuquillo	*El País*	1.1 mil	No data provided	64,0	0,7
Javier Espinosa	*El Mundo*	1.6 mil	0,3	36,1	3,7
Mónica G. Prieto	Freelance	No account or not found	-	31,4	0,2
Mónica Bernabé	*ARA*	2.1 mil	0,2	29,3	0,1
Luis de Vega	*El País*	4.7 mil	0,8	26,0	0,1
Esther Yáñez	Freelance	6,5 mil	1,7	24,0	0,2
Alberto Rojas	*El Mundo*	Private account	-	22,5	0,4
Jacobo Garcia	*El País*	No account or not found	-	22,5	0,5

Marc Marginedas	*El Periódico de Catalunya*	Less than one thousand	No data provided	21,8	0,5
Cristian Segura	*El País*	Private account	-	13,4	0,8
Leticia Álvarez	Freelance	Private account	-	11,9	1,2
Laura from Chiclana	Freelance	24.5 thousand	5,1	11,8	0,9
Pilar Cebrián	*Antena 3*	6,2 mil	4,1	11,6	0,8
Sara Rincón	*La Sexta*	8.4 mil	4,8	8,0	0,1
Maria Senovilla	Freelance	Less than one thousand	No data provided	6,5	3,6
Cristina Mas	*ARA*	No account or not found	-	5,2	0,2
Sara Gómez	*EFE Agency*	Less than one thousand	No data provided	3,8	
Maria-Paz Lopez	*La Vanguardia*	Less than one thousand	No data provided	3,4	0,2
Óscar Gutiérrez	*El País*	Private account	-	3,1	1,0
Orlando Barria	*EFE Agency*	4,2 mil	4,7	2,9	0,1
Luis Doncel	*El País*	No account or not found	-	2,7	0,4
Olhga Kosova	*La Razón* and *20 Minutos*	No account or not found	-	1,7	0,3
Felix Flores	*La Vanguardia*	No account or not found	-	1,4	0,1

Source: Own elaboration based on HypeAuditor data, 2024.

Although Instagram's data has been included because it is the most accurate data provided by HypeAuditor, in general the social network most used by journalists is X (formerly Twitter), which since its consolidation in Spain has become the preferred network for citizens to access and comment on current events.

Mikel Ayiestarán (@mikelayestaran), the journalist with the highest number of followers of those collected, has not published much about the conflict in Ukraine since October because he covers the Israeli Palestinian conflict. It should be noted that the X social network does not allow a longer publication history. The most recent posts on the war in Ukraine date from 30 November (188 likes and 62 reposted) and 25 November (204 likes and 125 reposted).

On Almudena Ariza's social network account X (@almuariza), several publications of the journalist's reports for TVE have been identified:

1) The destroyed and childless villages in Ukraine (65 likes and 19 reposts) from 14 September.
2) The opening of schools in Ukraine with bomb shelters (more than a million likes and 356 reposted) on 1 September.

Although it is not possible to know the exact figures of the coverage that these journalists have given to their professional reports on the conflict, there is no doubt that social networks have become an essential tool for the visibility and image of many of these reporters.

## 5.2.   *Disinformation in the Context of the Conflict*

Faced with the new reality of fake news, initiatives have emerged to combat it and raise awareness of the need to stop its spread, such as Verifica of RTVE, EFE Verifica, Maldita.es and Newtral. These sites have identified some of the most significant cases of hoaxes, such as the following:

1) At the onset of the conflict, Ukraine denounced the death of numerous Ukrainian civilians in Bucha, a claim that Russia sought to discredit by propagating hoaxes, such as the one involving the alleged movement of corpses or the assertion that the deceased were in fact actors (RTVE, 2023). In such circumstances, the role of journalists in the field is of particular significance, as they strive to gather and disseminate evidence that disinformation seeks to conceal. On 3 April 2022, Almudena Ariza (@almuariza) published a tweet on her personal X account, appealing to the massacre in Bucha that the Russian authorities sought to conceal: "how much the comments of the denialists hurt from here [...]".
    In 2022, the case of Marianna Podgurskaya, a pregnant woman whose image of herself leaving a bombed hospital in Ukraine even made the front pages of the mainstream media, also attracted significant attention. However, digital platforms spread the hoax that "she was a model and that she was not even pregnant" (Maldita.es, 2022).
2) Another of the most prominent events was the circulation on social networks of a fake interview with an alleged observer of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in which she accused Ukraine of organ trafficking. EFE Verifica proved that the woman in the video had not "worked as an observer for the OSCE, according to OSCE sources" (Sánchez y Ocaña, 2023), and that "the images illustrating the interview were taken from unrelated videos" (Sánchez y Ocaña, 2023).
3) In August 2023, the widely publicised plane crash that resulted in the demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin occurred. A fake video was published on the social network X, which in theory showed the moment of the disaster and which exceeded "2,500 retweets and accumulated 2 million reproductions" (RTVE, 2023).

Additionally, Google has developed a search engine, Google Fact Check Tools Explorer[3], which facilitates the identification of verifications of content conducted by independent organisations, including those previously referenced. Utilising this search engine has facilitated the identification of 162 instances of false content disseminated online in our country since the onset of the conflict. It is acknowledged that there may be a multitude of other disinformation-related content that is not currently being tracked by the search engine or identified by the organisations that are devoting efforts to this task.

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[3] Access to the Google Fact Check Tools Explorer: https://toolbox.google.com/factcheck/

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of results considered false in reports on the war in Ukraine. From January 2022 to December 2023.
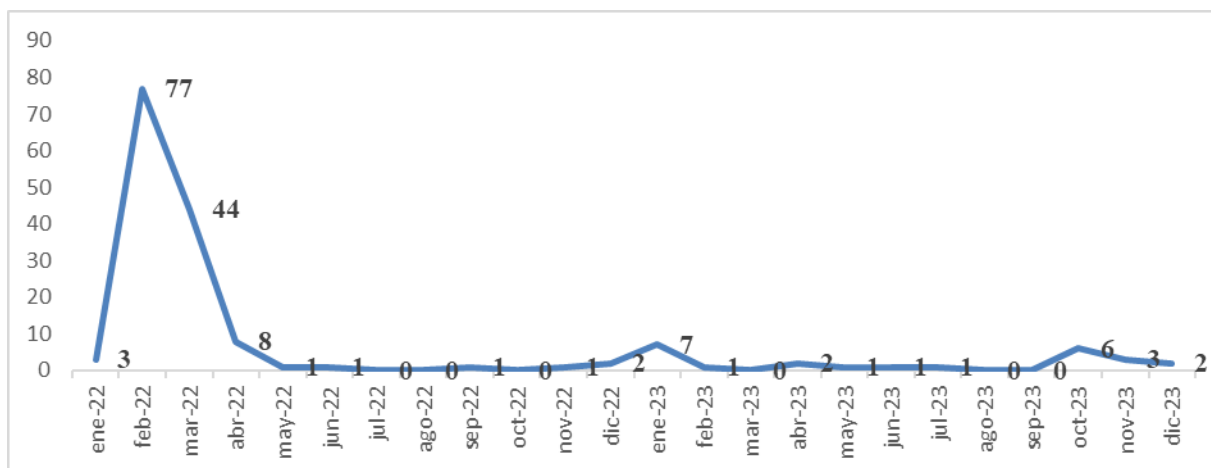
Source: Own elaboration. From Google Fact Check Tools Explorer search results, 2024.

Of the 162 results, 138 correspond to 2022, which represents more than 85% of the false content detected, while the remaining 24 correspond to 2023. A similar trend was observed in the case of disinformation, with a heightened production detected at the onset of the conflict. A total of 77 results were identified in February, marking the 24th day of the Russian invasion. The search engine identified only a single piece of content during the months under study (July, August and September), which pertained to a verification by Newtral rating, disputing the veracity of a video published on TikTok in which it was claimed that the United Kingdom had sent a spying robot to Ukraine.

6. Conclusions

One of the key conclusions that can be drawn from the study is the difficulty of compiling the social impact and scope that the treatment of an issue on digital platforms has had. In addition to the large number of existing platforms and networks, it is evident that information and data are a key factor in business today, and companies dedicated to tracking digital impact have proliferated. However, most of these entities offer their services exclusively to newspaper companies, media agencies and advertisers, perceiving this data as a strategic asset for their digital growth. This information empowers companies to enhance their understanding of user behaviour, thereby fostering interactivity, to study their competition and to capture a greater share of advertising investment.

The utilisation of information technologies is a pivotal element in the formulation of propaganda strategies by any political entity, particularly in the context of armed conflicts on an international scale, such as the war between Russia and Ukraine. While the second Gulf War instilled in the public the perception of experiencing the war as it unfolded on television, the paradigm has undergone a shift in the case of the war in Ukraine, with social networks assuming a predominant role.

In terms of the media coverage in our country, the utilisation of information technologies has been instrumental in shaping the journalistic output during the months of July, August and September, as evidenced by the leading newspapers' readerships, which are collectively represented by news companies. This phenomenon is in stark contrast to the heightened intensity of news coverage witnessed in the initial months of the conflict. It is also important to consider the potential seasonality in news consumption and production during the summer months, particularly in August, as well as the unequal treatment of certain topics by the media, which tend to accord greater prominence to specific sections. Concurrently, these media outlets employ very similar content strategies on social networks, exhibiting minimal differentiation in their content. The most significant aspect is the current affairs that can be presented in a compelling manner through images and videos, particularly those with a high probability of going viral due to their emotional resonance. Through the videos and images disseminated on social networks, a continuous association of these images with the prevailing reality is

established, rather than as a representation of it. The strategic nature of all communication is underscored by the prevalence of image-based presentations in contemporary news and information dissemination. These visual depictions frequently entail the omission of crucial information or the absence of thorough factual examination.

With regard to journalists who have covered the conflict directly from Ukraine or Russia, not all of them use social networks to the same extent as a channel for information and work visibility; however, those who do use them make more intense use of the social network X. It is also important to note that propaganda is, on many occasions, synonymous with the dissemination of disinformation, which can come from both the official authorities and from third parties who exploit the conflict to their advantage. While the full impact of these strategies remains ambiguous, the war in Ukraine has been a focal point for numerous hoaxes and disinformation campaigns. The emergence of new information verification platforms has enabled the identification and mitigation of these phenomena, though this process necessitates the education of citizens, who must be cognizant of the issues and equipped with the necessary tools to identify and combat disinformation. Digital platforms are utilized by authorities employing diverse strategies. In the context of Ukraine, these platforms have been employed by the authorities to maintain communication with the populace and bolster international standing. Conversely, the Kremlin has utilised these platforms as a means of imposing censorship on the media. In response to this censorship, citizens and journalists have sought refuge on platforms such as Telegram since the onset of the invasion.

TikTok has gained significant popularity during the conflict, providing a platform for the voices of the Ukrainian people and soldiers. This conflict has notably introduced a novel dimension to warfare by showcasing every day and even humorous scenes from the frontline, a phenomenon that has not been previously observed in war reporting. The utilisation of social media has empowered individuals directly affected by the conflict to share their experiences, circumventing the conventional media filter that typically frames war narratives through a factual lens, with a lesser emphasis on personal accounts. Nevertheless, the depiction of quotidian or even humorous scenes of warfare has the potential to trivialise the conflict for consumers, rather than provoke critical thinking. Consequently, it can be concluded that information technologies have played a significant role in altering the manner in which information is produced and consumed, as well as the impact they have had on social and cultural transformations, particularly in the most developed countries. Consequently, further study of the impact and use of information technologies can assist in not only a more profound comprehension of the phenomenon, but also in the identification of new opportunities and risks of the information society.

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